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Actionable Evidence Initiative Case Study

Improving Academic Success and Retention of Participants in Year Up's Professional Training Corps

Jessica Britt, David Fein, Rebecca Maynard, and Garrett Warfield

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PROJECT
EVIDENT

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The Actionable Evidence Initiative

Led by Project Evident with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Actionable Evidence Initiative seeks to understand and remove barriers to building evidence that is equitable, useful, credible, and relevant for practitioners as they aim to improve the outcomes of students who are Black, Latino/a/x, or experiencing poverty. Please visit <https://www.projectevident.org/actionable-evidence> to learn more, join our network, and find partners interested in working together on actionable evidence solutions.

Actionable Evidence in Education Cases

This case is one in a series commissioned by the Actionable Evidence Initiative in 2020 and 2021. (Cases are published on the Project Evident [website](#).) The series illustrates how researchers, evaluators, practitioners, funders, and policymakers across the country are exemplifying principles of the Actionable Evidence framework. It profiles a range of settings, actors, learning questions, methods, and products, unified by a commitment to practitioner-centered, timely, practical, equitable, and inclusive evidence building. Each case describes the origins, development, and results of a research or evaluation project, along with the authors' reflections on their experiences. Our hope is that these cases will provide both inspiration and practical guidance for those interested in generating and using evidence that leads to better and more equitable outcomes for youth and communities.

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Actionable Evidence in Education: Improving Academic Success and Retention of Participants in Year Up's Professional Training Corps

Jessica Britt, David Fein, Rebecca Maynard, and Garrett Warfield

Executive Summary

This case study describes a small randomized controlled trial (RCT) comparing alternative strategies for monitoring and supporting academic achievement in Year Up's Professional Training Corps (PTC) program. Year Up is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preparing economically disadvantaged young adults for well-paying jobs with advancement potential.

This study is one of several conducted by Year Up and its research partners at Abt Associates and the University of Pennsylvania to address questions related to the development and effects of the PTC program (Fein et al. 2020). This study relied primarily on extant data to test strategies for improving participants' success during the PTC's initial six-month Learning and Development (L&D) phase, which required full-time college coursework. Success in L&D was necessary to progress to the next six-month phase of the program (full-time internships).

The study team worked closely with practitioners to generate actionable evidence for guiding program improvement. The tested innovations were a local response to academic difficulties staff perceived to be a major cause of participants dropping out during the L&D phase. The researcher-practitioner team (including local PTC staff) used feedback loops to tweak the improvement strategies during and after testing.

As part of the study, Year Up and its research partners designed and tested strategies for more quickly identifying and supporting participants struggling with their college coursework. To ensure the credibility of the study findings, the team randomly assigned participants either to a coach who would use the new monitoring and support strategies or to a coach who would follow existing practices, which did not place much emphasis on academics.

Over two cycles of testing, the study found strong evidence that the alternative strategies tested substantially improved success in courses and, thus, advancement to internships. Three factors contributed to the resulting evidence being actionable: (1) it focused on low- to no-cost, field-initiated practice changes that could be implemented widely; (2) site staff could tailor strategies to local needs and opportunities; and (3) the research team encouraged local staff to modify the strategies being tested between enrollment cohorts.

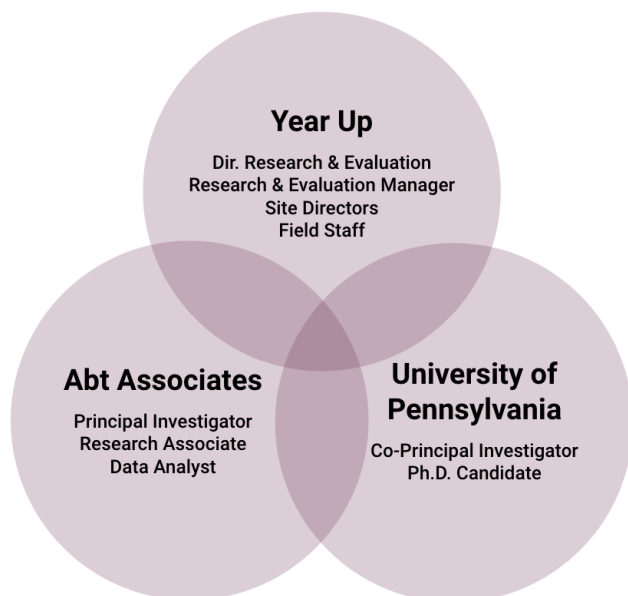
About the Project

Partners

This project included three partner organizations — each with strong records of collaborative research (Figure 1). [Year Up](#) is a large nonprofit organization with programs in 19 U.S. cities offering basic and technical skills training to high school graduates from low-income disadvantaged backgrounds. It has a strong track record of collaborating with research and evaluation partners. [Abt Associates](#) is a large social science research firm headquartered in Rockville, MD, and was working on a separate evaluation of Year Up’s original program when the PTC study began. The [University of Pennsylvania](#) is a large major research university with a top-ranked graduate school of education and researchers with extensive experience conducting field-based research.

The roles of these three organizations in the newer PTC research — conducted with support from the Social Innovation Fund and Institutes of Education Sciences — shifted across different studies. As illustrated in Figure 1, for this study focused on testing alternative strategies for academic monitoring and supports, Year Up maintained full control of site relations, administrative data collection, and sharing and decisions about dissemination of findings within the organization. Abt Associates and Year Up shared responsibility for the partnership agreement and for integrating this study with other related research activities.

Figure 1: Partners in Evidence Building



Principal Roles of Partners in the Improvement Study

- A. **Year Up Only.** Site relations management; administrative data collection & sharing; dissemination of findings internally
- B. **Year Up & Abt Associates.** Partnership agreement; integration w/ other projects
- C. **Year Up & University of Pennsylvania.** Designing the improvement strategies for testing; planning and carrying out sample intake & enrollment; routine monitoring
- D. **Year Up, Abt Associates & University of Pennsylvania.** Scoping and prioritizing evidence needs; planning the scale & approach to the study; sharing interim findings; preparation and dissemination of coaching tools resulting from the study
- E. **Abt Associates & University of Pennsylvania.** Administrative data analysis; data access from NDNH & NSC data; interviews, observations & focus groups with program staff, program partners & participants; briefings of Year Up staff and study sponsors; preparation of study reports

All three organizations were actively engaged in scoping and prioritizing wider evidence needs; planning for the test of improved strategies for academic monitoring and supports; sharing interim findings; and preparing and disseminating coaching tools resulting from the study. However, for this particular study, the Year Up and University of Pennsylvania teams took the lead in working with the PTC program staff to design the alternative strategies for testing, plan and carry out the sample intake and randomization, and conduct routine monitoring of the implementation of the study, including the alternative and usual coaching and support strategies being tested. The evaluation itself was jointly conducted by the Abt Associates and University of Pennsylvania team members.

Year Up's Approach to Serving Youth

Year Up is a national 501(c)3 workforce development organization founded in 2000 with the mission of providing equitable access to economic opportunity, education, and justice.

Year Up's original program, which it refers to as its "core" program, serves young adults aged 18 to 24 who have a high school degree or equivalent but who are disconnected or at risk of disconnection from higher education and quality job opportunities. Over 90 percent of participants are non-white and roughly two-thirds are still living with parents and living in households with incomes of less than \$30,000 when they enroll. Participants enroll in a year-long program, spending six months in basic and technical skills training courses followed by six months in internships with corporate partners. The goal is for these internships to culminate in full-time jobs related to the technical training participants engage in. The core program succeeded in generating large increases in earnings (nearly \$8,000 a year, or 34 percent), and it returned \$1.66 in net benefits to society for every dollar spent on the program. But, at \$28,290 per participant (in 2014), the core program was relatively costly (Fein et al. 2021).

Year Up designed PTC to operate on college campuses and leverage college instruction and resources in part to reduce costs and improve scalability. The model aims to provide training and supports comparable to those in Year Up's core program (Maynard et al. 2018). College partnerships introduced opportunities but also challenges for Year Up (see Fein et al. 2020). The challenge motivating this sub-study is that less intensive contact between PTC staff and participants during their basic skills and technical coursework appeared to make it more difficult to identify and provide timely support to participants who were at risk of failing their coursework and not progressing to internships.

Year Up's History of Research Partnerships

Over its 20-year history, Year Up has been a heavy user of internal monitoring and evaluation approaches drawn from business and other nonprofits. It also has continually worked with external evaluators to expand the range of evidence available to support refining and scaling its programs. Year Up currently manages over 50 partnerships with different partner research organizations. Year Up credits its focus on evidence produced internally and through these partnerships as contributing to its success in continually expanding the number of young

adults it serves and improving outcomes. Research and evaluation also have been helpful to guide Year Up's response to the challenges faced in transitioning elements of the Year Up program to virtual delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Origins of the PTC Evaluation Effort and the Mini-Experiment

The PTC evaluation grew out of a shared experience with the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education ([PACE](#)) evaluation, a large-scale, long-term impact evaluation commissioned by the Administration for Children and Families. The PACE evaluation was conducted by Abt Associates and, during the planning phase, the lead University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) researcher for the PTC evaluation that is the focus of this case. The Abt team actively solicited Year Up's participation in the PACE evaluation as one of nine fully-developed, seemingly high-performing career and technical programs targeting low-income adults.

At the time Year Up joined the PACE evaluation, it was planning its PTC program. By 2015, Year Up was growing its original PTC sites in Baltimore, Miami, and Philadelphia, and beginning expansion to new cities even though it was still struggling to meet performance benchmarks. The initial launch of the PTC experienced performance shortfalls, including under-enrollment and higher program attrition relative to goals. If left unchecked, these shortfalls threatened the model's viability as a scalable version of Year Up's core program. The latter, though highly effective in improving employment and earnings for disadvantaged young adults, has relied heavily on philanthropy to cover costs (Fein & Hamadyk 2018).

Year Up received a Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grant to support development of the Philadelphia program — support that came with requirements for an implementation and summative evaluation. This led Year Up to reach out to the Abt PACE team for evaluation assistance, which in turn led to involving staff at the University of Pennsylvania. Shortly after, the Abt/UPenn team suggested pursuing an Institute of Education Sciences Development and Innovation grant (IES Grant Number [R305A150214](#)) to support a more expansive, actionable approach to accelerate and strengthen program improvement and impacts throughout the PTC through strategic use of research and evaluation. Moreover, although the origin, goals, and processes differed substantially between the two evaluation efforts, five of the seven team members for the PTC evaluation also worked on the PACE evaluation.

The aim of the resulting partnership was to help Year Up accelerate the PTC's development and strengthen its overall performance through several mini-studies focused on specific improvement goals and to launch a randomized controlled trial that, over time, would provide rigorous evidence on the overall success of the program in improving employment outcomes. Between the SIF and IES projects, the team had about \$2 million over four years to complete a suite of evaluations that together met the goals of both grantors. This report deals with one of three mini-studies focused on priority areas for improvement of the PTC.

Approach to the Mini-experiment

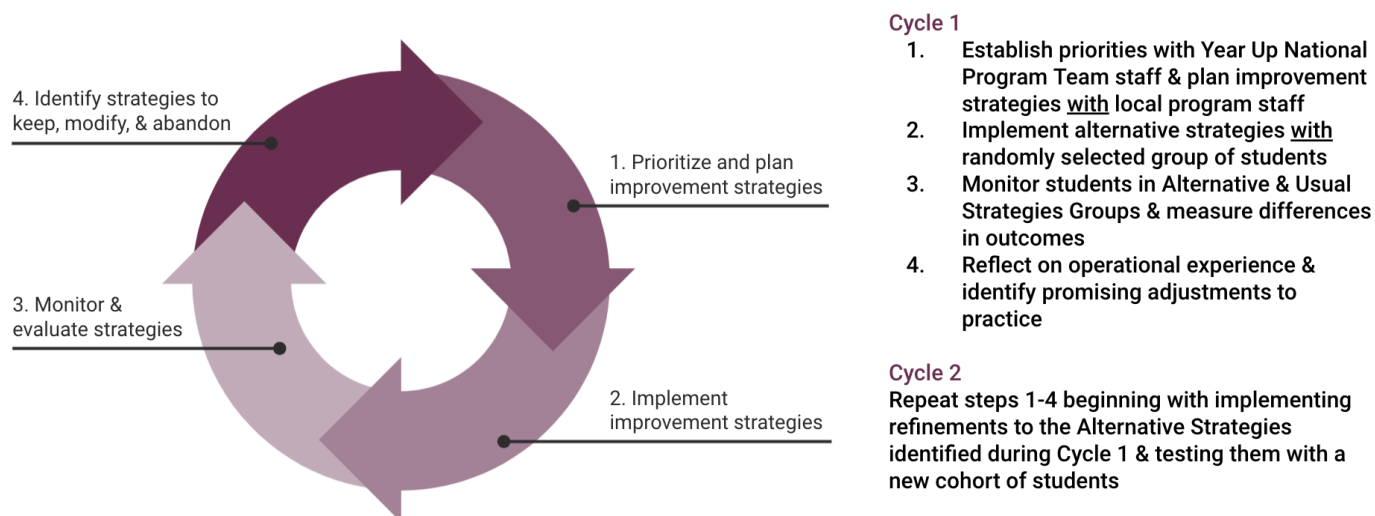
The design of the small study that is the focus of this paper, what the study team affectionately called the “mini-experiment,” was guided by four factors: (1) the information needs of Year Up staff to maintain and improve operations, including tailoring services to the needs of individual participants; (2) available funding for the evaluation and the expectations for and constraints on its use; (3) the feasibility of producing timely and credible evidence on various issues of utmost importance to the program; and (4) the collective evaluation experiences of Year Up and its evaluation partners. The resulting evaluation entailed a planning phase, two cycles of testing of improvement strategies, and a summative analysis and reporting phase (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Project Timeline

Stage 1: Plan	Stage 2: Roll Out Strategies in Testable Ways		Stage 3: Evaluate & Communicate
Identify Sites & Strategies (July – Dec. 2016)	Improvement Cycle 1 (Jan. – June 2017)	Improvement Cycle 2 (July – Dec. 2017)	Conduct the Evaluation (Jan. – June 2018)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Brainstorm strategies ❑ Plan roll-out ❑ Train staff in design & strategies ❑ Prepare for intake & random assignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Enroll cohort 1 ❑ Randomly assign students to treatment condition ❑ Deliver services based on assigned group ❑ Conduct regular check-ins ❑ Review & refine alternative strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Enroll cohort 2 ❑ Randomly assign students to treatment condition ❑ Deliver services based on assigned group ❑ Conduct regular check-ins ❑ Provide internship services to cohort 1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Estimate impacts ❑ Document strategies used ❑ Interview site staff & students ❑ Collect artifacts used for alternative strategies ❑ Share findings

Stage 1 entailed roughly six months of assessing needs and prioritizing areas for evidence building with Year Up’s national staff and site leads. Stage 2 entailed two cycles of developing and testing improvement strategies, allowing experience-informed modifications to strategies between cycles (Figure 3), and Stage 3 focused on a summative evaluation and communication of findings.

Figure 3: Program Improvement Cycles



Co-Developing an Evidence Agenda

Having described the focus of this case study, this section explains the process for selecting this topic. The partners identified three focal issues for study through a series of stakeholder engagements, a review of readily accessible historical program data, and brainstorming evaluation options with Year Up's national leadership team.

The evaluation team conducted interviews and focus groups with a diverse array of PTC stakeholders, including Year Up national and local staff, and college and employer partners (see [Exhibit 1](#) and [Exhibit 2](#), respectively). These conversations were relatively brief (45-60 minutes) but extremely beneficial. They established a connection with key players and allowed us to gather important contextual information that was useful in planning, implementing, and interpreting findings from our work. They also allowed the team to learn about the priorities of key stakeholders and their views about the opportunities and challenges to various avenues for program improvement. Finally, they were a source of information to help us interpret study findings as they emerged.

Some conversations were by telephone, while others took place during on-site visits that were occurring for other purposes. All followed a discussion guide designed to explore the program's four major phases (recruitment and screening, learning and development, internships, and post-program services) as well as important cross-cutting issues. Team members began each conversation with a brief explanation of the intended use of the information gathered and a commitment to maintain confidentiality of responses, and they

sent a brief thank-you following each call or interview. Interviewers maintained detailed notes and/or transcripts of all calls on a secure server accessible only to evaluation staff.

This outreach generated an initial list of 13 topics of high interest to the organization ([Exhibit 3](#)). Through a series of discussions with national staff, the project team culled that list for issues that could be evaluated well in a relatively short time period and that were not already the focus of a substantial, separate Year Up improvement effort.

One such issue became the focus of this case and the mini-experiment: establishing strong monitoring of academic performance of participants and effectively providing support to participants experiencing challenges.¹ This topic arose from concerns that poor academic performance was reducing retention. In addition to Year Up's interest in generating good outcomes for participants generally, the PTC financial model calls for over 90 percent of program revenues to come from employer-sponsored internships that participants enter following successful completion of their college coursework. Thus, poor retention has a direct impact on the financial sustainability of the program.

Year Up staff believed that more timely identification of and support for students who were struggling with their courses could make a meaningful difference. Thus, Year Up was especially keen on an evaluation that could inform strategies to strengthen its coaching of participants so as to ensure timely identification of academic challenges and provision of supports.

The evaluation team carried out the study, with support from Year Up partners at critical junctures. The principal investigators led the research design process, working closely with their Year Up partners. They collaborated with Year Up's National Research and Evaluation team and local site directors on high-level planning of the alternative strategies for academic monitoring and support to be tested, site selection, sample enrollment (including randomization), and making meaning from and disseminating the findings. They supported the PTC site staff on detailed planning and implementation of the alternative strategies to be tested and assumed responsibility for monitoring their implementation. They also collaborated on the design and coordination of data collected from PTC staff and participants to support the evaluation.

¹ The other two topics addressed as part of the IES Development and Innovation grant were: (1) supporting employers' development and maintenance of internships that consistently provide high-quality workplace experiences and (2) reconciling tensions between Year Up's traditional emphasis on full-time career track employment and the increased emphasis in the PTC programs on continuing in college after program graduation. The evaluation team's response to the other two priority issues is described in Fein et al. (2020).

Developing Improvement Strategies to Be Tested

Several principles guided the development of strategies to be tested and the methods used to evaluate the success of those strategies. First, since a major challenge for the PTC was its high operational costs, the alternative strategies required modest to no additional resources to implement. Second, the program and evaluation staff agreed that it was very important to come up with strategies that, if effective, could be implemented successfully throughout the PTC. Third, the partners needed to be able to judge the success of the program in near real time. Fourth, given the importance of improving program retention, it was critical to produce credible evidence about the effectiveness of the strategies tested for improving academic success and program retention.

The first and second principles were addressed by enlisting three sites operating in different contexts to participate in the study and by agreeing that local program staff would drive development of the alternative strategies for testing. The third principle was addressed by relying on Year Up's own program data and the evaluators' experience accessing data from the National Student Clearinghouse. The fourth principle led the evaluation team, working with Year Up and the local programs, to devise practical strategies for using a two-cycle experimental design to test the staff-designed alternative strategies for academic monitoring and support.

Selecting the Study Design

The team chose to use random assignment and extant data to test the staff-generated, low-to no-cost strategies for improving participant academic success. The team viewed the experimental design as critical for this study for two reasons. First, the stakes for getting credible evidence were high, as Year Up needed to find a way to substantially lower program attrition for the PTC to be financially sustainable. Second, retention rates varied substantially from cohort to cohort within and across sites, making it impossible to come up with an alternative design that would arguably produce unbiased impact estimates.

Implementing the changes for a random subset of the participants in each cohort achieved two complementary goals. First, Year Up could focus its attention on training and supporting only some of the local program staff to implement the alternative strategies for academic coaching and support; the remaining staff could continue to operate as usual. Second, randomly assigning participants to the usual or alternative strategies enabled the study team to generate unbiased estimates of the benefits (or lack thereof) of new approaches. The very minor cost of this was that the evaluation and Year Up national team members needed to be extremely flexible to carry out the random assignment on a schedule that did not require Year Up's intake staff to accelerate admission decisions and to tailor procedures to site preferences around issues like blocking the sample by career track, gender, and sibling status prior to randomization.

Running the experiment over two enrollment cycles signaled to program staff that Year Up and the study team expected and encouraged staff to suggest refinements to the original strategies based on their experience. Testing strategies over two cycles also doubled the sample size and allowed the evaluation team to capture the effects of cycle to cycle variation in program context and test iterations of the improvement strategies themselves.

Unlike traditional RCTs, which strive to minimize changes in the intervention during the study period, the framework for this study actively encouraged program staff to reflect on their experiences with the improvement strategies in cycle 1 and implement changes where they seemed warranted for cycle 2. This strategy is a hallmark of Improvement Science and Design-Based Implementation Research and common in rapid cycle evaluations (RCEs). While the evaluation partnership was created specifically to evaluate Year Up's PTC, it exhibits qualities commonly found in research-practice partnerships (RPPs) and networked improvement communities (NICs), including strong commitments to shared responsibility for efficient production and dissemination of actionable evidence aligned with Year Up's goals of optimizing PTC performance.

Designing the Alternative Strategies for Testing

The study team conducted a quick, focused examination of time trends in academic performance of participants in various PTC programs and the practices for monitoring performance and assisting participants identified as struggling with their coursework. It then selected three local PTC programs that differed in the nature and degree of challenges faced to develop and rigorously test low-cost, high-promise strategies for improving academic success and retention during the learning and development phase of the program.

The evaluation team worked with Year Up national team members to outline general parameters for the alternative strategies that would be tested (for example, weeks not months until they could be implemented, modest additional funding, strategies that could be tried with a subset of participants). The alternative strategies tested were designed by the PTC program staff in the three study sites, with guidance from Year Up national teammates and support from the evaluation team. Site staff drew heavily on craft knowledge gained through working with PTC participants, as well as focus groups and interviews conducted by the evaluation team.

The sites selected strategies to address three common goals: (1) improve access to and tracking of participants' academic performance; (2) use real-time academic performance information to inform coaching of participants; and (3) improve participants' access to needed resources and support services. However, the specific strategies adopted in each site were tailored to perceived obstacles to and opportunities for success in the local context ([Exhibit 4](#)).

Figure 4. Strategies Prioritized for Testing and Tactics Used

Cycle 1: Alternative Strategies Tested	Cycle 2: Modifications to Alternative Strategies
<p>Improved access to & tracking of performance data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailored outreach to instructors during orientation (instructor luncheons-1 site) • Established mechanism for accessing students' grades (designated person to gather & distribute info) • Shared spreadsheet containing feedback from instructors <p>Systematic & planful use of information on academic performance to inform coaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused more deliberately on academics during coaching • Created one-page coaching guide to flag academic issues (2 sites) <p>Additional resources & supports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded portfolio assignment to include academic focus (1 site) • Hired Academic Coordinator (1 site) • Created a textbook library (1 site) • Ordered and distributed Wi-Fi hotspots (1 site) • Increased referrals to existing college tutoring & support services 	<p>Additions and enhancements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased coach access to information on academic histories and grades • Updated one-page coaching guide to a Weekly Academic Coaching Notes Sheet • Created Academic Coaching Binder (Year Up, 2018) • Conducted formal coach training on the Academic Coaching Binder • Focused on academic issues in Learning Community meetings • Increased centralization of information on support resources <p>Strategies abandoned or de-emphasized</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abandoned efforts to provide shared access to Wi-Fi hotspots (strategy to be tested cycle 1, but not executed) • Lowered expectations that instructors would serve as primary source of information on students' academic performance

There were three common features of the strategies adopted in cycle 1. One was a shift to more explicit focus on academics during weekly coaching time. The second was a targeted effort to enlist greater feedback from the college instructors. The third was development of formalized ways to manage and respond to information on the challenges participants were having with their coursework.

Strategy implementation was locally managed, with a moderate level of monitoring by Year Up National and the evaluation team to make sure there was a clear understanding of what was similar and different in the experiences of participants receiving the usual strategies for academic monitoring and support and those receiving the alternative strategies being tested. The specifics of how sites implemented these strategies varied. Moreover, each site also instituted one or more other strategies as well. For example, one site instituted strategies to ensure participants had access to textbooks, one worked on making loaner mobile hotspots available, and two sites created beefed up tutoring supports (Figure 4, Cycle 1).

At the initiative of program staff, there was a round of mid-course adjustments to the tested strategies. In all study sites, coaches abandoned strategies that did not appear to be helpful in cycle 1 (Figure 4, Cycle 2). For example, programs modified their use of coaching services based on what they found to be useful, and the site that experimented with providing access to mobile hotspots abandoned those efforts. All sites increased emphasis on those strategies that were showing promise, such as focusing more explicitly on academics during weekly

coaching. Year Up team members informally shared some of the tools and strategies that seemed to be working well across sites — most notably, some of the coaching tools that staff working with the alternative strategies group had created or adapted from existing Year Up tools.

For both cycles of testing, the site staff shared the details of the alternative strategies that were planned for testing with Year Up national staff and the evaluation team. However, the ultimate decisions about implementation were largely in the hands of local staff, with the understanding that it was very important for them to share with the study team, through low-stakes and low-burden monitoring, information about what they were doing to monitor and support the participants in the alternative and the usual strategies groups, respectively.

Credible, Low-Burden, and Accessible Data Sources and Analytic Methods

Some sources of data for the study were selected for practical reasons. Year Up carefully manages an administrative data system where individual and summary data on participants are readily available. For example, the main analyses measured the impact of the improvements on program retention through the L&D phase (i.e., first six months of program participation) via internal administrative data, and measured continuation in college after L&D through data obtained from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#).

Other data sources were jointly designed by the study partners to provide greater insight into implementation of improvement strategies. To minimize burden and promote efficiency, data collection was coordinated with Year Up's pre-existing processes. For examples, this study used bi-weekly monitoring calls with site staff ([Exhibit 5](#)), semi-structured observations of regularly scheduled coaching sessions ([Exhibit 6](#)), brief surveys of coaches and participants ([Exhibit 7](#)), and supplemental questions added to Year Up's exit interviews with participants ([Exhibit 8](#)).

The effectiveness of the improvement strategies was estimated by comparing L&D retention rates and continued college enrollment rates for PTC participants who were assigned randomly to the group who received the alternative strategies for coaching and support services with rates for participants who received the usual services. Because participants were assigned randomly to one of these treatment groups and reliable outcome data were available for the full study sample, the point estimates of impacts of the alternative strategies are highly credible.²

² The data were weighted to account for the proportion of participants assigned to the alternative strategies group, which varied over enrollment cohort and among sites. Means were adjusted using multiple regression analysis to improve the precision of the impact estimates and control for any chance differences in the characteristics of the participants assigned to the alternative and usual strategies groups.

Transparency and Respect for Participants, Stakeholders, and Site Staff

PTC staff informed all program applicants that Year Up continually engages in research designed to improve the program experiences of participants. They also described what this entails (e.g., possible random assignment to different service options and respectful management of data that Year Up or its evaluation partners may collect from or about them). Each time participants were asked to engage in any form of information gathering as part of the evaluation, the evaluators introduced themselves, described the purpose of their encounter, and provided assurances that all information shared would be used in a manner that did not disclose its source ([Exhibit 9](#)).

The evaluation team solicited assistance from PTC staff to recruit participants for focus groups, following general guidelines regarding numbers and characteristics desired for each group. Focus group participants were reminded at the outset of the purpose of the conversation and of the evaluators' commitment to protecting the confidentiality of information shared during the session. For this study, focus group participants were given \$50 gift cards at the conclusion of the session.

The evaluation team limited engagements with college and employer partners to specific needs for information exchange — for example, to learn how their engagement with the PTC program staff and/or participants was going, identify and prioritize challenges and, importantly, identify and build on opportunities for improving the PTC. Typically, first encounters were preceded by an introduction from Year Up National directly or a senior member of the local site staff.

The team was prompt in following up and maximally flexible in terms of the venues and schedules for subsequent engagements. In most cases, the evaluation team provided food and beverage selections for in-person meetings, which was always appreciated.

The evaluation team found it useful to share a working agenda in advance and to always begin the encounters with a recap of its goals—whether to solicit cooperation with or input for the evaluation, provide an update on findings to date, or both. The evaluation team then prefaced all information gathering activities (e.g., semi-structured interviews, routine monitoring calls, or site observations) with a verbal commitment to maintain the confidentiality of all information shared. All sessions ended with brief notes of appreciation. Importantly, the team worked hard to adhere to scheduled meeting times, recognizing that program staff, college and employer partners, and participants are all very busy people.

The bi-weekly monitoring calls the team held with site leads followed a structured protocol typically requiring no more than 15 minutes to run through. In cases where there were issues warranting more follow-up, the responsible evaluation team member typically scheduled time for that at a later, mutually agreeable date.

A Stable Research Collaboration with Qualified and Complementary Partners

The stability and complementarity of roles within the research partnership helped it generate considerable, high-value output. Senior members of the team from each of the three organizations brought extensive program evaluation expertise. The Year Up lead guided the work to identify and prioritize the focal topics for research, to coordinate with Year Up national teams and the local PTC sites for implementation issues, and to plan dissemination and follow-up on the research findings. The Abt lead led the high-level evaluation planning, including coordinating this work with the various other studies that were co-occurring and IRB and data management planning, while the UPenn lead assumed primary responsibility for the design and implementation of this particular improvement study as well as co-occurring implementation and cost analyses in one of the three mini-study sites.

Other members of the team had more specialized roles. One focused on management and analysis of the quantitative data, a second on planning and implementation of both experimental evaluations and conduct of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, and a third on designing surveys, conducting focus groups and semi-structured interviews, and analyzing qualitative data from focus groups and interviews.

Team members had regular check-in calls (weekly during busy times). However, most of the work was accomplished through e-mail exchanges and task-specific meetings. While the task-specific work commonly required only a subset of the group to participate, information relevant to the engagement was shared more broadly during weekly or bi-weekly check-in calls. All team members were involved in product reviews.

Project Cost and Efficiencies

The overall evaluation initiative carried out under this partnership to date included five studies in addition to the mini-experiment that is the subject of this case report: (1) an implementation study of the first PTC program (Fein & Maynard 2015); (2) a study examining college persistence patterns post-Year Up (Fein & Shivji 2017); (3) a study examining strategies for setting up successful internship experiences (Maynard et al. 2018); (4) a cost and scalability study (Fein et al. 2020); and (5) a short-term impact evaluation (Fein et al. 2020). Funding for the suite of evaluations conducted under the two grants available to this partnership totaled a little over \$2 million. We estimate that the improvement study focused on academic monitoring and supports cost about \$400,000 in external support.

However, it is important to note that a by-product of the high-functioning partnership is that the lead staff from each partner organization exercised many opportunities to economize by coordinating efforts across these various studies and to take advantage of prior work experience and products. For example, the team adapted the training manual created for the

mini-experiment for use in the impact evaluation and was able to use interviews with employers and college partners that were originally fielded for stakeholder engagement in several of the studies. The mini-experiment benefited from the fact that the lead evaluators had extensive experience designing and carrying out studies like this. This meant they had readily available tools, software, and experienced support staff to carry out tasks like conducting “overnight” randomization of program applicants and acquiring and processing data from the National Student Clearinghouse. The team also benefited from the fact that Year Up has a well-functioning data system to manage its participant services and financial records, and Year Up committed significant time from its highly skilled Research and Evaluation team to support the work.

Another important feature of the partnership is the fact that, like all Year Up staff, its Research and Evaluation staff partnering on this project served Year Up participants directly as coaches and were active members of the program’s learning communities. Thus, they brought to the partnership direct experience working with the target population, which was enormously helpful in ensuring the alternative strategies tested and the interpretations of study findings were informed by local context.

Challenges and Responses

This project encountered no serious challenges with the design or implementation of evaluation of the alternative strategies aimed at improving academic success and program retention. In part, this is attributable to the fact that Year Up was eager to have solid evidence to guide program improvement and has a strong data and evaluation infrastructure. Another important factor was the extensive experience of the Abt and the UPenn staff leads with this type of work. It also helped that the study team empowered program staff to identify the problems to address, which led to their being vested in the effort. This included engaging them in coming up with the hypotheses about which “levers” to pull and how to pull them to achieve success and in working hand in glove with the study team on the mechanics of random assignment. The team leads provided general feedback on the study throughout the process, while also monitoring implementation through low-burden, non-judgmental monitoring processes.

Many challenges commonly encountered in evaluation efforts like this were avoided in this case because the evaluation team was small, experienced, and stable over the course of the study. The mini-experiment team nimbly tailored “master protocols” to local contexts, which improved efficiency and was helpful in building and maintaining support for the study. Over the course of the project, the study team garnered enduring support of program staff through its adoption of a stealthy, non-judgmental, no-frills approach to monitoring the alternative and usual strategy conditions and by offering timely feedback on study findings as they emerged. The evaluation team also invited program staff to refine their alternative strategies mid-course.

For example, one make-or-break issue in this study was the evaluation team's ability to come up with a plan for randomization that met several critical program requirements: (1) staff needed to control the occupational training tracks to which participants were assigned; (2) staff needed the option to selectively separate or "pair" participants for assignment (e.g., siblings); (3) some sites needed the option to vary the odds of assignment to particular groups; and (4) random assignment needed to occur at an hour/time designated by program staff. The mini-experiment lead researcher worked with the Year Up site leads and Year Up national lead to set up tailored random assignment protocols for each site and enrollment cycle that allowed for near-instant turnaround of the assignments on the eve of program orientation. While pesky, the task was manageable through advanced planning and coordination among the program and research staff.

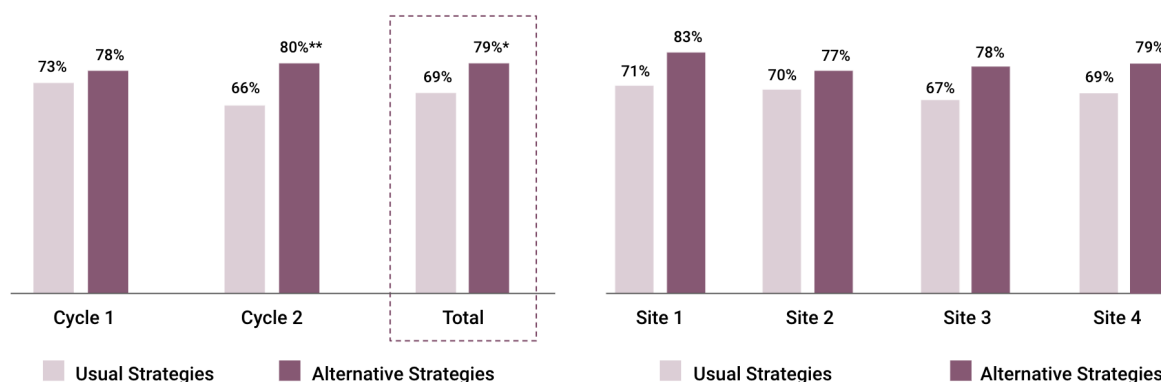
While issues like the need to create a rapid, customized random assignment process can feel daunting the first time an evaluator is confronted with them, they are relatively easy to address through careful advance planning. Given the range of issues that arise, it can be helpful to have members of the evaluation team with varied types of training and prior experiences themselves and whose peer networks offer expanded opportunities to build off prior work by others in related contexts or using similar study designs and evaluation methods. For example, many of the exhibits attached to this case study (e.g., interview protocols, observation protocols, monitoring guides) were adapted from prior work of the evaluation team members and colleagues. They can provide starting points for designing tools for new and different studies in the future.

Results

Participants in the alternative strategies group were substantially more likely than their counterparts in the usual strategies group to successfully complete their college courses.

On average, participants who were randomly assigned to receive the alternative strategies had 10 percentage point higher rates of retention through the end of the Learning and Development (L&D) phase of the program than their counterparts who experienced the usual program strategies (Figure 5). They also were much more likely to be enrolled in college in the following academic term. Differences in the rates of successful completion of L&D and of re-enrolling in college the following term favored those in the improvement strategies group for both cohorts of participants and for participants in all three PTC sites that participated in the study. Notably, impacts were substantially larger for the second cohort than for the first (14 versus 10 percentage points) and the estimated impacts were uniformly positive in all three sites for the second cohort of participants – ranging from 7 to 12 percentage points higher among the alternative strategies groups.

Figure 5: Retention of PTC Participants through the Learning and Development Phase



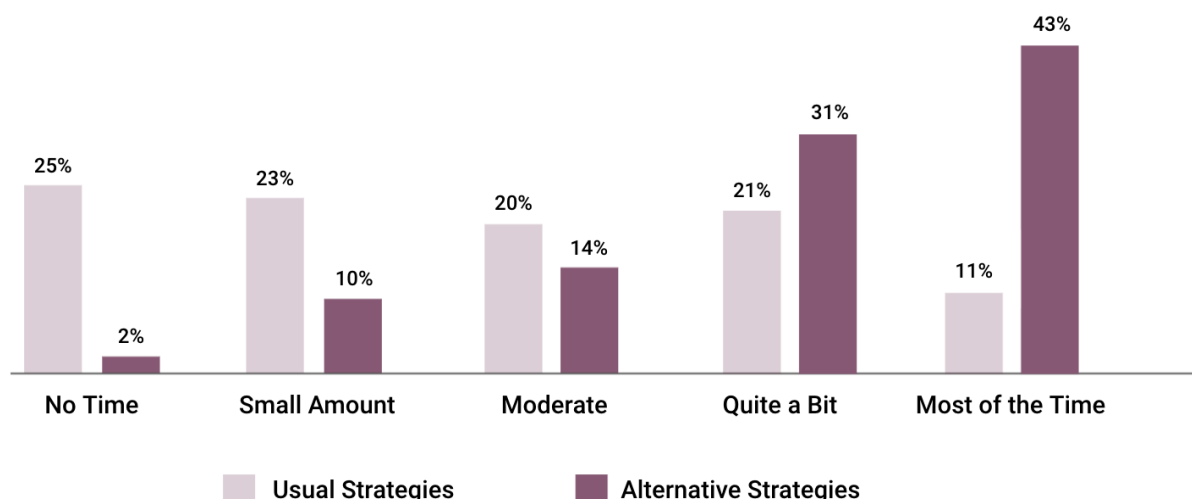
Source: Data on retention are from the Year Up program data system. See Maynard et al. 2018, Table 20.

Notes: N = 317, 163 in the Usual Strategies Group and 154 in the Alternative Strategies Group. Data are weighted to account for the blocking of participants prior to randomization. Estimates for the alternative strategies group are regression adjusted to control for baseline characteristics. The mean differences between the usual and alternative strategies were not statistically different across sites or between the two cohorts.

* = statistically significant at the .10 level, ** = .05 level, and *** = .001 level on two-tailed tests.

Coaches working with participants assigned to the alternative strategies group reported substantial changes in their approach to coaching. They were substantially more likely than their counterparts using the usual coaching strategies to report spending higher proportions of their coaching time discussing academic performance, as well as spending more time on social and work issues. Yet they were less likely to report spending coaching time on generic Year Up topics commonly addressed during group coaching (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Coaching Time Devoted to Academics versus Other Topics



Source: Surveys completed with coaches working with participants following the usual or alternative strategies during cycle 2 of testing. See Maynard et al. 2018, Table 22 for full details.

Notes: N = 27; 15 Usual Strategy Coaches and 12 Alternative Strategy Coaches. These are unadjusted means intended for descriptive purposes.

Coaches also reported having much greater awareness of academic challenges among their coachees than did coaches who were working with participants assigned to receive the usual services. For example, 38 percent of the coaches using the alternative strategies versus 15 percent of the coaches using the usual coaching practices reported that academic challenges were concerning issues for their coachees (Maynard et al. 2018a, Table 22). Coaches in the alternative strategies group also were much more likely to refer their coachees to tutoring (46 versus 14 percent). Notably, participants in the usual and alternative coaching groups also described having quite different experiences working with their coaches.

Participants' Descriptions of Coaching

Usual Strategies Group

“Mainly [my coach and I] talked about our contract, our point system, if we lost any points ... and about internship, how would we act, . . . and the best ways to ask for help if you're having trouble with [work] while you're on internship.

Student 1

“As far as my (college) classes, [coach] would ask me about them but it was up to me to disclose, so I guess if somebody said they were doing fine, and they weren't, the coach wouldn't find out until it was time to send in grades. It's more of up to you to say if you needed help...

Student 2

Alternative Strategies Group

“With my coach, he was on it immediately, because I was starting to fail classes and he would be like, 'Alright come on, we're going to take you to tutoring.'

Student 3

“With me, she [coach] would get with my professors or I would tell her myself. And sometimes I would pull up my grades to her, you know. I'm doing good, and I'm struggling here and there. And she would give me the support if I needed it.

Student 4

The main study findings were shared broadly with Year Up staff. The primary method of sharing the main study findings and recommendations with the Year Up national staff was timely, online briefings of about an hour in duration. These typically were preceded by a brief pre-read summarizing the study, findings, and recommendations and a post-read document providing more detail — both formatted in slide format to facilitate online reading. Reports began with a bulleted overview and ended with a bulleted recap. The body of the report was heavy on graphics with strategic insertion of quotations and observations.

The team also shared emerging findings with Year Up staff on an as-needed basis to support strategic decisions. For example, the team briefed the National Staff on the findings of our field efforts aimed at prioritizing evaluation topics and broad evaluation plans and they provided high-level general feedback to national and local staff in conjunction with other phone or in-person encounters.

In addition, various staff from all three organizations presented on the evaluation at professional conferences and invited research and policy seminars. These included presentations featuring the rapid cycle evaluation methods used for a research methods convening sponsored by the Office of Policy, Research and Evaluation ([DHHS](#)) and annual conferences of the American Education Research Association (AERA), the American

Evaluation Association (AEA), the Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM), and the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (SREE). As required under the terms of the supporting grants, we also prepared final project reports to the Institute of Education Sciences (Fein et al. 2020) and the Social Innovation Fund (Fein & Maynard 2016; Maynard et al. 2019) that included findings of the various evaluations conducted as part of the respective funding agreements.

The main evaluation report included four recommendations to Year Up. The central recommendation was to modify the program's approach to coaching during the L&D phase to include a deliberate focus on academic goals, achievements, and challenges. A second recommendation was to offer formal staff training on academic coaching strategies with an emphasis on improving early identification of academic challenges and devising timely strategies to help participants address the challenges. Recommendation 3 was for program staff to be on the alert for additional ways of identifying academic challenges that would complement asking participants directly. Recommendation 4 was for Year Up national staff to consider other applications of the evaluation-based improvement process used in this study.³

Year Up's response to the study findings. Year Up national staff and the participating PTC programs are using evidence from the evaluation to improve practice. Staff at study sites report they are still using the coaching practices developed and tested in the study as well as the system they created for documenting and sharing participant information. This has improved academic oversight and facilitated early detection of academic challenges, and is improving retention in the study sites. The Year Up national team also rolled out features of the improved coaching strategies, including a binder of tools assembled as part of the evaluation effort, to all of its programs nationwide and staff have continued to iteratively adapt these shared materials to local contexts (Baelen, Britt et al. 2020).

Year Up national staff and the directors in the study sites responded favorably to the approach used in this evaluation for framing their operational challenges in a context that supported rigorous, low-burden testing of solutions. More importantly, they acted

On the Academic Coaching Binder

“ The coaching binder was so awesome because coaches used to go into the room and just kind of, “Okay, so talk to me about your weekend, what happened with your weekend? So [now] coach just wasn't asking about the weekend...we have a four-month outcome to make sure they get converted or placed into a job where they continue with their education, so how are we helping them academically?

PTC Staff

³ In addition to the main study reports, this team produced other research reports related to the PTC program. Two were specifically for the Social Innovation fund: one covered early implementation of the Philadelphia Program (Fein & Maynard 2015) and one expanded on this improvement study and included a cost analysis of the PTC (Maynard et al. 2018). Two were prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences: a summative report (Fein et al. 2020) and a companion manual containing implementation tools and guidance from the improvement study discussed here (Baelen et al. 2020).

on the findings from the study. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Year Up needed to pivot to fully online programming. Even so, there is evidence that the resources developed through the mini-experiment are still being used.

The project team attributes the success of the project to three factors. The first is engaging stakeholders in selecting improvement goals. The second is working closely with the local program staff in designing the evaluation to ensure it produced credible impact estimates with minimal disruption of operations. The third is using low-stakes, low-burden approaches to monitor the experiences of participants.

Alignment with Actionable Evidence Principles

Principle	In This Case...
Centers on Community Needs and Voices <i>Addresses the context, perspectives, priorities and assets of students and families, along with the challenges they face</i>	<p>This project centered on the priority needs of Year Up to fulfill its mission of “closing the opportunity divide.” Finding a way to support high rates of success in college courses was critical in order for participants in a new adaptation of the Year Up program model to achieve positive outcomes. This program imperative resulted in the decision to conduct a mini-experiment focused on testing strategies for improving academic success and program retention during the Learning and Development phase of the program.</p>
Prioritizes Practitioner Learning and Decision-making <i>Answers questions that are highly relevant to policy and practice, and that help practitioners prioritize decisions in service of students and families</i>	<p>Participant attrition was a priority concern for Year Up staff, both as an indicator that participants’ needs were not being met and because only participants who were successful during the Learning and Development phase of the program progressed to internships, which were the source of revenue to support the program. Staff were challenged to reflect on what they knew about who was failing during L&D, the various challenges contributing to academic challenges, and ways they might both improve their awareness of and response to these challenges.</p>
Enables Timely Improvements <i>Allows practitioners to make evidence-informed decisions in a timely manner</i>	<p>Through dedicated support of site directors, national staff, and the research team, sites were able to implement the improvement strategies for the upcoming enrollment cycle, generating data about effectiveness within six months. Site directors encouraged staff to continually evaluate the improvement strategies and supported modifying the strategies for the second enrollment cycle. The evaluation relied on readily available program administrative data for judging effectiveness, so there were no delays in access.</p>

<p>Credible and Transparent <i>Uses high-quality data and analysis, aligning methods with practitioner questions, timeline and context</i></p>	<p>The evaluation used an experimental design for estimating impacts, thus addressing threats of selection bias. The primary outcomes (course completion, program persistence, and persistence in college courses) were based on readily accessible administrative data, either from Year Up or from a national database.</p> <p>Descriptive data on implementation of the strategies and the response of participants and staff were gathered through multiple sources (bi-weekly monitoring calls, focus groups with students, observations of staff meetings, and student surveys), making it possible to triangulate information.</p>
<p>Responsive to Operational Context of Practitioners <i>Reflects the context in which practitioners operate, including organizational settings, relationships and resources, and political and policy environment</i></p>	<p>The evaluation staff tailored study implementation plans to local contexts. Year Up's national leadership team and site directors shared responsibility for implementation of those strategies in a minimally disruptive manner. The evaluation team collaborated with site staff to minimize intrusion on operations without compromising the integrity of the study.</p>
<p>Accessible and User-Centered <i>Clearly communicates research design, analysis, and findings to facilitate practitioner understanding and use</i></p>	<p>The research team shared a preliminary version of the study findings with the Year Up partners for feedback prior to refining them for presentation to Year Up local and national leaders in a webinar. The release of findings occurred approximately three months after the end of data collection (15 months after sample enrollment). Following the webinar, the research team sent participants a "post-read" slide deck containing more detailed findings from the study.</p> <p>Two members of the partnership team (one from Year Up national team and one from the University of Pennsylvania) collected coaching tools that were identified during the study period by staff at one or more of the study sites as helpful and assembled them in a shareable and indexed "coaching binder" that is currently used throughout Year Up (Baelen et al. 2020).</p>

<p>Builds Practitioner Capacity for R&D <i>Provides practitioners with data, products, tools and trainings to own and advance their evidence agenda</i></p>	<p>Year Up program partners were actively engaged in the sample recruitment and development of the randomization procedures. While randomization itself was conducted by the evaluation staff on de-identified participant records, the program partners had access to the randomization templates and algorithms and now have the ability to carry out similar sampling plans in the future, albeit without the level of independence afforded the evaluators in this study.</p> <p>By virtue of their active engagement with all stages of the evaluation, the Year Up evaluation leads broadened their capacity to undertake more and different analysis internally. The program also benefited from some of the quality review and cleaning of administrative data conducted for this study.</p>
<p>Attends to Systemic and Structural Conditions <i>Considers systems, policies, practices, cultural norms, and community conditions that drive inequity, including those related to poverty and racism</i></p>	<p>A core feature of Year Up’s approach to improving economic and social outcomes for participants entails working to understand and address differences in cultural norms within and across communities, population groups, and contexts (e.g., work, school, home) that facilitate or impede youths’ success in the program and beyond. One example of this commitment to addressing systemic and structural conditions is Year Up’s policy of requiring all staff to serve as participant coaches. In addition to filling a need for strong coaches, this policy serves as a means to ensure all staff gain authentic exposure to the policies, practices, norms, and local conditions that affect participant outcomes. As a result, all staff are tuned into the diversity of challenges participants face and strategies they have adopted to avoid and overcome them. The staff-participant bonds created through coaching also build trust.</p>

Reflections and Conclusion

This study differed from the typical program evaluation in several important ways. First, it focused squarely on issues of immediate concern to practitioners — in this case, Year Up leadership and staff. Second, work was conducted in the context of a well-functioning partnership among program management, student-facing staff, and the evaluation team. Third, the evaluation team had experience and tools needed to produce highly credible evidence with minimum burden on program participants or staff. Fourth, findings were shared on a schedule and in a format that was useful to the program staff.

This work was made possible in large part due to flexibility on the part of funders. One funder, the Social Innovation Fund, allowed the team to restructure the research agenda to delay a traditional impact evaluation of the PTC program in the Philadelphia site. This allowed the team to “braid” the SIF evaluation with the IES-supported development grant to add the rapid-cycle improvement study prior to launching the summative evaluation.

The resulting improvement study helped Year Up greatly strengthen its PTC program and provides a meaningful example to the wider evaluation field of how the principles of improvement science can be applied to generate highly credible, actionable evidence. This case demonstrates flexibility and responsiveness among all parties, and a willingness to revisit the original, three-year-old funding and evaluation plans.

Site staff drove decisions about the alternative strategies for academic monitoring and support that would be tested. Within broad guidelines, the Year Up team was empowered to design strategy changes that meshed with their local contexts. Moreover, encouraging the study sites to modify strategies for the second cycle of testing based on experience was an explicit invitation for them to participate in a program improvement effort, not just a study. Monitoring of the academic coaching and supports during the study period was light-touch, but strategically timed to encourage continuous reflection by program staff while also providing contextual information to support the study.

The external evaluation team drew heavily on its Year Up partners for guidance in designing and communicating with local staff. This guidance included counseling us in the program language, protocols for meeting preparation, conduct and follow up (e.g., pre-reads; tailored protocols; timely and conventional formats for follow-up). Products of the evaluation included not only conference calls and post-reads presenting study findings, but also a compendium of tools that were assembled, tailored, or otherwise created by program staff working with participants in the Alternative Services Group. This compendium, referred to internally as “The Academic Coaching Binder” or “The Binder” has since been adapted for use throughout Year Up as part of its adoption system-wide of lessons from the study (Baelen et al. 2020).

Online Exhibits

[Exhibit 1: Staff Interview Guide](#)

[Exhibit 2: Focus Group Guide](#)

[Exhibit 3: Potential Mini-study Topics Emerging from Stakeholder Outreach](#)

[Exhibit 4: Usual and Alternative Strategies Tested](#)

[Exhibit 5: Bi-weekly Monitoring Guide](#)

[Exhibit 6: Site Observation Protocol](#)

[Exhibit 7: Coach Survey](#)

[Exhibit 8: Supplemental Questions for Participant Pre-Internship Survey](#)

[Exhibit 9: Sample Consent Form](#)

Note: The authors and the study team have chosen to share these tools with the hope that others may find them useful to adapt for their own work.

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Jessica Britt serves as Director of Research & Evaluation, Direct Service Program at Year Up, one of the nation's leading workforce development organizations. Jess has over ten years' experience in program management and evaluation both in the US and internationally. In addition to her work at Year Up, Jess serves as a member of the Board of Directors for Safe Passage/Camino Seguro in Guatemala City.

Dr. David Fein, a Principal Associate in Abt's Social and Economic Policy Division, has led a series of technically demanding random assignment evaluations of interventions promoting self-sufficiency within low-income populations. Trained as a demographer, his technical expertise spans qualitative and quantitative methods, with a focus on measurement of career trajectories, psycho-social skills, couple interaction and errors in surveys and censuses. Currently, he serves as principal investigator on a major Administration for Children and Families-funded national random assignment study of promising career pathways approaches — Pathways to Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) and is directing a series of studies of the Year Up organization's next-generation career programs for young adults, with support from the Department of Education, Social Innovation Fund, and Arnold Ventures.

Rebecca Maynard is a leading expert in the design and conduct of randomized controlled trials and rapid-cycle evaluations to generate actionable, equitable evidence to improve education and social policy and practice. She has conducted influential methodological research, including co-developing the PowerUp! tool for the design of efficient samples for causal inference studies and the Registry of Education Effectiveness Studies (REES). From 2010-12, she served as Commissioner of the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). She also is past President of both the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) and the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (SREE).

Garrett Warfield is Chief Research Officer, Year Up. He oversees work designed to improve and test the impact of the program, including large federally sponsored studies and partnerships with dozens of leading research firms and universities across the country. As a social science expert determined to make research fun, Garrett frequently travels nationwide presenting to nonprofits, philanthropists, local and state agencies, and scholars about the latest and greatest developments in research methodologies and results. Garrett has spent 20 years as a researcher and all-around data nerd for government agencies, nonprofits, and universities. Currently, he lends his time and expertise to the social and public sectors by serving as a [Leap Ambassador](#) and as an Advisory Board member both for [Results for America](#) and the [Possible Project](#). Garrett holds a Ph.D. in Criminology and Justice Policy from Northeastern University.

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Case Keywords

post-secondary | low-income | program improvement | random assignment | rapid cycle evaluation | experiment | administrative data | nonprofit service provider | federal government agency | external evaluator | internal evaluator | educational attainment | program retention